

Planting bulbs through grass is a good way to increase a lawn's biodiversity, and it can be mown for summer.

# Green in Every Sense

Monocultural lawns have been in the firing line recently as our interest in biodiverse, sustainable gardens increases. We talk to leading garden designers about how they apply an environmentally friendly approach to using grass in their designs



**Above** At Malverleys in Hampshire, an expanse of green grass is the perfect calm foil to an exuberant border.

**I**s the smartly striped, immaculate bowling green lawn a thing of the past? Certainly with the drive to make our gardens and gardening more sustainable, more of us are questioning the eco-credentials of a perfect lawn. But equally, many feel there's still a time and a place for a carpeting expanse of soft green.

The best approach is probably one of compromise: a smart lawn where required as part of the garden's design and rougher grass in informal areas where it's better suited. One belief that unites many garden designers, however – especially in the city – is that in the tiniest of gardens a lawn the size of a postage stamp can be a mistake, particularly for owners pressed for time. “Lawns are high maintenance since they require weekly mowing,” explains Sara Jane Rothwell of London Garden

Designer ([londongardendesigner.com](http://londongardendesigner.com)), “whereas a herbaceous border might just need a monthly tidy and weed, and it will support a higher diversity of flora and fauna.” To maximise wildlife appeal in the smallest gardens, floriferous planting can be a better choice than a little patch of grass barely a few feet across, although a small expanse of clover or camomile lawn might appeal where there's unlikely to be much foot traffic.

It's the lawn's lack of biodiversity that has caused some to frown upon it in recent years. “There's little doubt that a monocrop of grass species forming a finely scalped lawn falls short,” says designer and presenter Chris Beardshaw ([chrisbeardshaw.com](http://chrisbeardshaw.com)). “But imagine the archetypal English garden of bountiful blooms and generous borders without a verdant lawn. The jigsaw is incomplete – the

aesthetic of this abundant style relies on the temperance of a lawn as the calming, contrasting foil to the border. So perhaps a more considered approach is not to banish this essential pigment from our palette, but to target its application with deliberate effect.”

Garden designer Sam Westcott ([samwestcottgardendesign.co.uk](http://samwestcottgardendesign.co.uk)) agrees there are occasions when a lawn is the best option. “I think there's still a place for that English rolling lawn,” she says, pointing to several gardens she's designed recently that feature circular ‘vicarage tea party’ lawns. “The circular shape is always a winner, and you can do various things to bound them, such as a steel edge, setts, a hoggin path, or sometimes an ilex or euonymus hedge.” And for designer Jonathan Snow ([jonathansnowdesign.co.uk](http://jonathansnowdesign.co.uk)), lawns have

an important role to play in crisp, contemporary gardens, offsetting smooth paving.

“Our clients still like a lawn,” says Andrew Fisher Tomlin, of Fisher Tomlin & Bowyer ([andrewfishertomlin.com](http://andrewfishertomlin.com)), “but we're increasingly using them as an integral part of the planting design, not a separate element. It means we aim for a better balance between a traditional lawn and planting, with the latter gaining ground.”

“Where we include a lawn in larger gardens, we try to place it near the house, and then the rest of it can be rough grass – although not necessarily a proper meadow because they are more high maintenance than people think,” says designer Charlotte Rowe ([charlotterowe.com](http://charlotterowe.com)). “And at certain times of year it does look a mess – you wouldn't want it right outside your front door, but

**Top left** Circular formal lawns make a pleasing design motif.

**Top right** A charmingly informal clover lawn in a small garden designed by Miria Harris.

**Above** Smart stripes work in this formal, symmetrical garden by Jonathan Snow.





over in the distance is fine.” Sam Westcott adds that there’s creativity to be found in the way rougher grass is maintained. Change the mower height to create shorter and longer areas, she suggests, and mow paths through it – each year these can be mown in different directions to ring the changes.

Rather than a wildflower meadow, which can be hard to establish, many designers advocate a meadow of spring bulbs. “Grass with naturalised bulbs can be cut sooner than wildflower meadows, so they look less scruffy,” says Sam Westcott. “Winter and early spring bulbs emerge when we least need access to the lawn, the flowers provide early nectar and they help alleviate soil compaction and improve drainage,” adds Chris Beardshaw. Andrew Fisher Tomlin’s favourites include *Muscari latifolium*, *Crocus* ‘Flower Record’ and *Tulipa saxatilis* ‘Lilac Wonder’. “These let us cut the lawn from late May, when we want to use it, whether that’s for play or entertaining,” he notes.

Turf can be useful for forming paths, whether that’s with stepping stones set through it or on its own in areas where there is lower foot traffic. “It’s softer, cheaper and better for the environment,” says Jonathan Snow. Both Jonathan and Charlotte Rowe use grass to cover sculpted landforms, often employed as an ingenious way to use spoil from elsewhere in the garden. Jonathan recently



transformed a garden’s disused pond into a helter-skelter earthwork, and Charlotte used landforms to hide a house and garden from passers-by while maintaining the garden’s views of the Chilterns. Let the grass grow long on these mounds and banks or plug them with naturalised bulbs such as dwarf narcissus, as recommended by Sam Westcott.

**Top** Rough grass and mown lawn at John Brookes’ Denmans. **Above** A grass-covered earthwork in a garden recently created by Jonathan Snow adds a strong visual element.

# LAWNS: *A Spring Care Guide*

## Mowing

As temperatures rise and grass starts growing strongly again, it's time to begin mowing the lawn regularly. Keep the mower blades high at first, lowering them gradually as spring progresses. Keeping the grass at 30-40mm high is a good length for it to stay smart, while retaining enough leaf for it to continue growing healthily and be better able to resist periods of drought.

To boost the lawn's appeal to insects, leave some of it unmown from late spring and let the grass and any resident flowers grow. Decorative effects can be achieved by allowing areas to develop into 'mini-meadows' this way. For lawn areas you want to keep short, expect to mow once a week when the grass is growing strongly.

Use a mulching mower, or a mower with a collecting box, to avoid leaving unsightly clumps of clippings behind, which will need to be raked up.

## Aerating and scarifying

If grass isn't growing well, these two spring tasks can make a huge difference to the appearance of a lawn. Aerating involves removing plugs of soil

from across the grass with a hollow-tine aerator (manually or by machine). This lets air in at the grass roots and relieves compaction, so it's particularly useful for high-traffic areas. Scarifying removes the layer of thatch and debris that can build up at the base of the grass over time. A mechanised scarifier is the best tool to use; rakes tend to thin the grass out rather than encouraging it to tiller and thicken.

## Moss treatments and fertilisers

Where moss has become problematic, look at addressing underlying causes, such as compaction, surrounding plants casting shade over the lawn, or poor drainage. There are treatments available that combine lawn weed- and moss-killing chemicals, but there is a growing range of non-chemical, bacteria-based products that may be preferred, such as MO Bacter, Westland's new Moss Master, or MiracleGro Evergreen No Rake. Once the moss has died off, it will need to be raked out.

If lawns need a boost, spring is the right time to start feeding them. Garden centre fertiliser shelves bulge with choice, many combined with lawn weed



**Scarifying** Worth doing every year or two to keep lawns thick and growing healthily.

treatments. Other options are available, such as Envii Greenkeeper's Secret which uses biostimulants, or Maxicrop's seaweed-based Moss Killer and Lawn Tonic. Alternatively, opt for a lawn-care service that offers seasonal treatment programmes to keep your grass in good health: with GreenThumb's NutraGreen Summer Ready programme, offered from April to June, a slow-release fertiliser is applied that supplies the required nutrition for ten weeks, taking care of this aspect of lawn care for you.

## Over-seeding and repairs

Lawn seed germinates readily once the weather warms up, so this is also the ideal time to fix any bare patches that have formed in areas of heavy foot-traffic, or through damage. Rough up the underlying soil, and scatter grass seed over the hole before raking in and watering. If the grass is looking a little thin, over-seed the entire lawn, but choose seed that will blend with the existing grass. If the lawn is comprised of fine fescue, patches of broad-leaved rye grass will stand out. Lastly, a little time spent smartening up edges with a half-moon cutter or edging shears always transforms the look of the lawn.



**Treating moss** Apply a treatment then rake out the moss once it has turned black.



**Over-seeding** Thicken up the sward by sowing more grass seed in spring.